

Rev. Willie J. Gallaher  
St. Mary's Missionary Baptist Church  
1038 Trenton St.  
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April 12, 2022

The Honorable Thomas A. Varlan  
District Judge  
United States District Court in Eastern District of Tennessee  
800 Market Street, Suite 143  
Knoxville, TN 37902

Your Honor:

I am writing this letter to plead for your mercy in the sentencing of Darren Payne. I am writing on his behalf because I respect the gravity of your calling and your duty to be just and make decisions that will result in the best for all parties. I am very aware of the influence that your decision has and can have in the life of Darren; as the decision of the late Honorable Judge Austin had upon my life when he gave me a second chance to correct my shortcomings in school.

I am very aware that what I faced paled in comparison to the serious drug charges that Darren is now facing with the potential for a long prison sentence. Yet, the mercy that you show while remaining true to your calling I believe can have a tremendous impact upon Darren and his future.

I have grown up in Roane County, TN and have remained a resident in Harriman after a short pursuit of basketball dreams. I look back over my life and along with many others who would tell you that 30 years ago; they would have never dreamed that I would be the man that I am today. A faithful husband of 28 years in November, a father who has been blessed to have two wonderful children; a son who is a successful Insurance agent/financial planner and a daughter who was tragically taken from us due to a train accident, a pastor of my home church St. Mary's Missionary Baptist church for the last 7 years of the 20 that I've been pastoring, and a high school basketball coach at Harriman High for the last 20 years. I am currently bi-vocational as I work for the Harriman Utility Board as a Network Administrator. I don't list all of this to boast but I often reflect back on the fact of the decision that the late Honorable Judge Austin made was a major part in helping me become the man, the productive citizen, and community leader that I am today.

As I reflect upon Darren; I see a lot of myself in him. As a member of the Harriman community, I have known Darren and his family for a long time. I really became more involved in Darren's

life when he started playing Middle School basketball. As a high school coach we try to support the athletes of our area and we noticed that Darren had some phenomenal athletic gifts. So as I began to watch him from afar; I noticed that Darren did not have a problem doing the work in the classroom, but Darren had a little mischievousness about him like most boys at his age. So the coaches, including myself would always stay on him along with his parents so that he understood that in order to play on the court; he had to maintain off the court. Once he came to high school, I noticed that Darren was someone that the other kids looked up to because he had leadership qualities. I would watch him during games and practice demand the effort from others as he put forth the effort himself. So when I think about Darren and his upbringing; I am confident that he has all the tools needed to be a productive citizen who can impact others as he finds the stability of himself. I think about the interaction that I witnessed between him and his children before he got off course; the love that they had for their dad and the love that he had for them. Before, he got off track; everywhere I seen him; I seen his children with him. I was excited to get to coach beside one of my former players as he was hired as an assistant coach on the Harriman High School boys staff but due to the accident that I mentioned earlier; I took time off and did not get to coach that year. But the time that I was able to be around him and watch him coach; he had an impact on the young men as they listened to his guidance.

I know his parents have placed respect and responsibility in his life that is why I was really disappointed and hurt when I heard the path that he was going down and now the whole reason for this letter. I don't know the reason Darren has made some of the choices that he made but I personally believe that losing the opportunity to coach high school basketball really had an affect upon him. As Darren being a part of that coaching staff that year had to take responsibility for their actions of coaching their players during AAU which resulted in them having to resign as coaches at Harriman. That was a blow to Darren that led to the path that he has found himself on at the moment. Basketball has and I believe will always be a part of Darren's life and losing such an opportunity can have an affect that makes one feel they have no purpose.

Your Honor, I know you deal with similar cases, but Darren is a good person who feels that he has lost his purpose and I believe with the right guidance and help; he can find himself to be that man, that productive citizen, that father and husband that he has longed to be. Because I believe that if I can do it, it is still possible for Darren.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my thoughts and I trust and pray for you and the guidance that is necessary to make the decision that you make.

Sincerely,

*Rev. Willie J. Gallaher*

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Pastor, St. Mary's Missionary Baptist Church